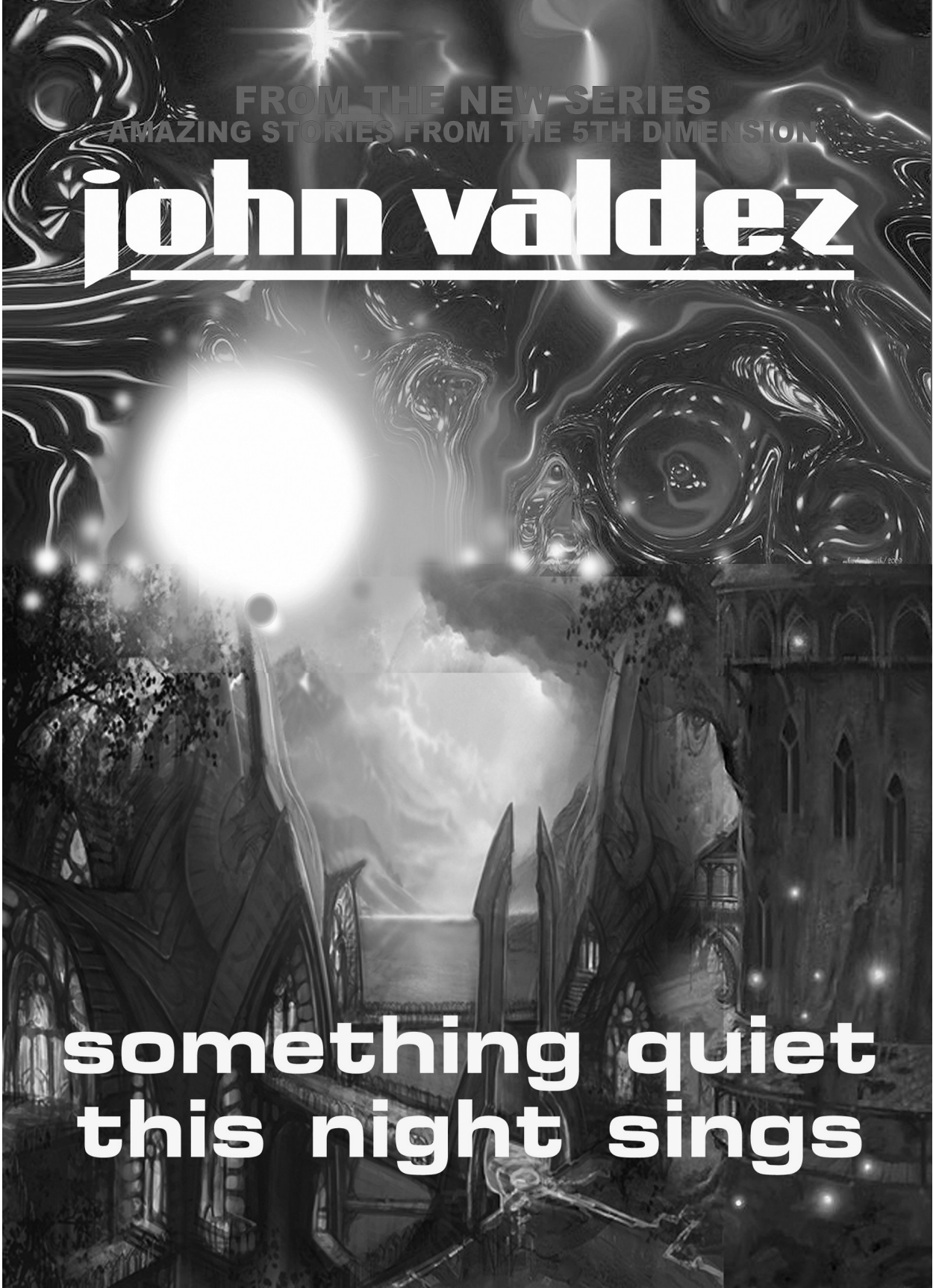




FROM THE NEW SERIES
AMAZING STORIES FROM THE 5TH DIMENSION

john valdez

**something quiet
this night sings**

SOMETHING QUIET THIS NIGHT SINGS

By John Valdez

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PROLOGUE

When a man takes his dream of xenography to a planet where pleasure is derived from local intoxications, he finds himself immersed in a complicated web of aliens and culture which redefine all that we know about addiction. We learn that its purpose and where a man like Dingo Blaine could end up is the result of what sings in your ears and what pounds in your skull. With only his will to live and a weak knowledge of what could be right or wrong, Dingo finds that getting what you want can have dire consequences; especially if what you want is so costly that in order to get it you have to accept that you are already in the 5th Dimension.

“Lodi, I need a jook!”

“What’s new?”

“I’m serious.”

“Really? Kiss off. No pay for the month.”

”I’m gettin’ money on the first—I swear.”

“So? You credit run out. Punky. You jook head. Dead weight. Go away.”

“I need an egg, man. What am I gonna do?”

“That you problem. Be back and you pay money.”

Shit. I was starting to hurt. Jook was what the natives called it—an egg you put in your ear. You haven’t had that gentle song till you had a jook. Jooky just felt great. You just can’t get any better. Most people could listen to jooky song all their lives and it never killed anyone. It was what the jook heads called a jo—songs that take away the pain in every way—and I’ve had a lot o’ jo’s. Ya, jo’s—you don’t get the half of it—with the intensity of an orgasm a hundred times or more and you might come close to the perfect song. If your eyes don’t fly outta their sockets on your first tune, you got a chance. Good jooky, bad shit, but you can’t live without it. But, me? I’m not addicted—I keep it under control—I can quit at any time. I’m smarter than those jook heads in the city burnt out on singing to themselves. So quittin ain’t a big deal—but who on Earth would want to? Then again, I’m not on Earth. Good thing too—there wouldn’t be enough jook to go around.

I really had to get back to the house. I vaguely remembered having an egg stashed for a rainy day and today looked pretty rainy. Not a cloud in the sky, but that didn’t stop the rain on this planet. I kept my little jewel in a special hiding place. It’s not the same one of course—I use an egg and every now and then when I get an extra, I put it back. I needed it soon too because my head was pounding. I ran like a wounded animal down the tree path, across the twisted branch bridge, stumbling in exasperation. Lodi had really let me down this time, but it was the same old story as always: natives taking control—running your life. Just like when they let the humans establish their outpost here with ridiculous conditions like, we can’t build anything? Shit! The natives got to do that. Even though they had holes in their head, they were smart; we had to share our building technology or what? Bastards would’ve let us rot. Well, I really didn’t care who did the work—I just need a jook. Sometimes, when I’m feeling good, I even show up to work in that building they were taught to put together.

Let it be known that I don’t get paid for my work. That’s right, I’m living the dream of a xenographer, the beauty, the travel and I’m freelance, so I’m almost as high on the totem pole as a worm snake. And, it’s pretty boring stuff to folks back home, researching alien cultures, publishing papers, cataloging artifacts and such to further the human reach in the universe. But I’ve always been good at doing things no one else wants to do and guess who the first person is they come to when they need to know something about this planet or anything that is going to help them get their way with the natives? Otherwise I don’t exist, and I like it that way. This place is primitive, not just by human standards, and the infrastructure is almost functional. The busy embassy, the culture exchange, the smelly humans: it all offered a much needed technology boost to the Treen anyway. Ya, the Treen—the pain-in-the-ass little natives who are stingy as hell with the jook. I don’t care what the humans want with this planet just as long as the Treen supply the jook. Speaking of Treens, here comes Debe—she’s a cool native.

“Yi, Dingo.”

“Hi, Debe. Got any jook?”

“Not today, hummer. Try Lodi.”

“Already did. Says I’m tapped.”

“Too bad, Dingo. You not a bad hummer.”

Hummer was pretty derogatory for humans. Not from Debe though. She was joking. I call her “tree crawler” every once in a while. That’s because they live in the trees. We screw around like that all the time. She was kinda cute for an alien. Too bad she didn’t have breasts.

“I have to go, Debe, Sorry.”

“Where?”

“Home.”

“You hiding jooky at home? Not smart, Dingo.”

“No, I just have to rest. That’s all,” everyone knew it. If you had jooky on you, or at your house, it was just dangerous.

“Look like you need a jook,” Debe walked off laughing.

“Oh, ya? No—kiddin’!” I needed a jook—bad too. I couldn’t wait to see that pretty little ova shaking in my hands—just stuff my head. It’s already been four days and my ear was burning like I had a blow torch pointed right at it. I rounded the bend, almost to my house where I was taking the short cut though middletown. Not a good idea really, not in my condition anyway. The Treen didn’t care much for humans in Middletown. They outright hated jook heads. Right now, I might be mistaken for one. Being human, just made it worse. I made it around the corner just in time to swallow my tongue. Tranx was standing at the end of the bridge street—not good, because he was standing between me and my only route home. He wasn’t you’re typical tree crawler and he wasn’t human. Tranx was a reptilian prick who arrived on this planet just ahead of the humans and started a trade guild which cut humans out of the picture. Tranx was psychopathic Zelox, and a hard nosed one at that—even for a Zelox. This was the kind of guy who collected shrunken heads and humans were among them. He had a passion for human. Your typical reptile bastard. He slithered toward me— his goons followed.

“SSSSSSSSa hummer in Middletown? Not ssssssmart, Dingo.”

“People keep tellin’ me that.”

Tranx back handed me with that claw-like foot he calls a hand. Pretty fast for a ten foot tall lizard, I might add. He was literally twice my size since I was a bit short for a human anyway. I spun a three-sixty before I fell flat faced to the bridge street. All I could do was push myself up, my ear hurting more than anything he’d just done to me. I looked around on the bridge street for the few transient teeth I might have lost.

“SSSSSSSSooo...Lodi tellsssssss me you owe him ten jooky. Why isssss that?”

That lizard accent was menacing. Here I am still picking up my teeth and this guy has more teeth in his head than all the humans on this planet put together. He’s asking a stupid question, “I...,” I choked on the blood. God damn it that hurt, “...will pay him on the first. That was the deal.”

“SSSSSSooooo...you better—hummer...”

Tranx waltzed off with his tail bouncing like a yo-yo. Treens were staring at me as they walked by—partly because I was still trying to pick myself up and partly because I was bleeding like a water spigot from the mouth. My blood of course was red but theirs—well, it’s a pale blue, kind o’ like window cleaner. I must be quite a sight for them, oh ya. The first time I ever saw a bloody Treen was the day I arrived just right outside the city. A little Treeny girl was found with her head missing—no doubt the work of Tranx and his crew. He’s been working this territory for some time. And, after all that has happened, I can now revel that my headache is gone since it has turned into one big massive, throbbing pain deep in my temples shooting straight into my eyes, nose and ears. I half walked, half crawled, half dragged myself to the house. Turning the

combination lock and getting it right was a chore after the miracle of getting home. The door opened and I slid inside. The place of course had been ransacked. I fell to my knees and just crawled to the sofa. I had to lie down because this was too much for one day. I lay across the clothes, papers, and even the extension cord powering my worthless alarm system. I wasn't too surprised that Tranx had been here first—I just thought he saw me on his way to my house. I knew the egg was gone because the table with the hidden compartment for my stash was all broke up in front of the sofa. I laid there in pain and defeat, drinking my own blood. At least I could breathe. The door opened.

“Yi, Dingo.”

“Oh...hi, Debe.”

“Tranx been here?”

“Ya.”

“Told you not to have jooky in the house. You see him and you still alive. Amazing!”

“Nope, didn't see him here. Saw him on the way out.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Me too.”

“You need a jook!”

“Don't waste your breath, Debe.”

Debe walked over and knelt by the couch, “Dingo, you need this more than me, here,” she put the egg into my ear. I immediately stopped bleeding and could feel the bruises healing. My stamina was returning. My eyes snapped open and I wiped the blood from my face. Even the pain was going away. I love a good jook.

“Thanks, Debe. I'm a new man!”

“No problem. We are friends, hummer. You need better life, Dingo.”

“Tell me about it. Run o' bad luck.” I was starting to feel a little more desperate than usual. It was a lot easier with jooky. What a relief. Now, back to the matter at hand. I had five days to pay back Lodi. I could probably scrape up three grand for a few things I brought from Earth and maybe a few hundred for body fluids, which out this far in space might actually net me another grand. I was still short six, and Tranx doesn't give credit. I doubt Lodi will cover me now. He'll hand me over to Tranx just to save his own head. On top of that, I'll need another jooky by then too.

“Debe, know where I can get seven thousand credits?”

“No, hummer.”

“Shit!”

“We could go the center.”

“That's downtown. No way. That's worse than Middletown. I wouldn't even come close to being welcome.”

“It's ok. You stay with me. No trouble. I promise, Dingo.”

“To the center?” ...just didn't sound like a good idea. Now the center wasn't on the ground—nothing ever touched the ground here. It was literally in the center of a forest of gigantic trees connected with tunnel bridges that eventually led to platforms above the tree tops. This was a place where all kinds of weird Treenies would hang out, drink the equivalent of alcohol and make bad business deals. Let's just say the Treens who go there aren't the kind you bring home to mother. Even she would call them tree crawlers. I really didn't have a better idea either.

“Okay. What the hell. I've got my jook.”

“You won't regret it.”

“I already do.”

We walked four bridge streets over and ran down the branch alley to keep from getting mugged. The center was under the bridge street, so we had to go downstairs through an abandoned building to get there. It might seem like a trashy entry, but the center was pretty upscale for downtown. The place was crowded as usual. You could tell the Treenies didn’t want me around. I just sat at the bar.

“Hummer. You STINK!”

Aside from what everyone thought of Treens, they were short, but they had an acute sense of smell. Humans weren’t their favorite aroma either. I realized I hadn’t bathed since the day before. I must be really ripe. Oh, well.

“Thanks. How about a glass of whatever.”

“You shut up! Hummer—you sit—shut up—or get out!”

Well, so much for conversation. I turned and looked at Debe. She shrugged and wandered off. Great. Now, I just have to keep my cool, while I trip on jooky here at the center. What was I thinkin’ coming out here in the first place?

After about an hour of the evil eyed bartender, Debe was back. She had another Treeny low life with her.

“Dingo, hummer?”

“Ya.”

“Debe say you need credits an’ jooky?”

“Debe knows the score. You got jooky, credits or what?”

“Shut up, hummer. Trying to get us killed?”

“No, but you have to be straight with me—none of this cloak and dagger crap.”

“I straight, hummer. You straight. Now, we go now.”

“Where?”

“You want deal?”

“Maybe.”

“Follow and shut up, stinky hummer.”

“Debe just looked at me apologetically. Well, I didn’t need her apology—it’s just the way the Treen are. Ya, they piss me off, and it’s still my job to know what they’re like. But that doesn’t mean I’m gonna let every two bit Treeny puke talk, gutter walk all over me. I don’t care about their manners—so what if they never introduce themselves or talk like four year olds. So what if their high pitch voices get on my nerves. Just give me that jooky, tree crawler. I’ll ask Debe later who this fat son of a bitch is—if we’re still alive—and I remember. We crawled through two different tree tunnels under the city. As we came to the end, we both got the honor of following that puffy little punk up to the floor above us. Debe was right behind me. I stood up. There were low life tree crawlers everywhere.

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